

## Agribusinesses change their ways

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BRIDGETON - Positive change is coming to New Jersey agriculture, thanks to the Food Innovation Center, a project of Rutgers University and the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station.

Since 2001, the Bridgeton center has helped 250 farmers and food industries develop "value-added" - or specialty - food products, such as jams and jellies, bottled wine, peach cider and frozen pasta sauce.

Industry experts guide clients every step of the way, said Lou Cooperhouse, director of the innovation center. They help some companies develop new products, show others how to improve packaging and marketing, and for some they provide advice on how to better operate the business.

Not really. Some companies develop brand new products, others are learning how to better package and market their products, or just how to run their businesses better.

Eleven benefit – Funding made available by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development program is an important part of the assistance program. This year, a total of 11 businesses will receive grants of up to \$5,000 each. That's enough to help companies take their first baby steps toward developing and marketing new food products.

"Funding such as this is vital to farmers whose success with value-added products may mean the difference between profit and loss - preserving the family farm or selling it and moving on," Cooperhouse said.

Among the grant winners this year is Goat World of Hunterdon County, which will use the money to study the public attitude toward goat meat and whether or not restaurants should place it on their menus.

Other grant recipients include Bellview Wineries of Landisville, the Garden State Wine Growers Association of Hamilton Square, the Sussex County Cooperative Milk Producers Association, a sorghum producer, a farmer who makes asparagus salsa and guacamole, and a fruit grower who makes blueberry preserves.

The Food Innovation Center is a one-of-a-kind place in the state, and possibly the nation, according to Andrew Law, New Jersey's director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development. Urban farming "It shows how farming in urban states can succeed if the necessary changes are made. The New Jersey model can work for other states, where farmers are experiencing similar cultural and economic pressures," Law said.

Bridgeton grant-recipient Dee Johnson said staff members at Food Innovation Center helped her "deal with the whole ball at once." Food center experts recognized the potential of her farm even more than she did, she said.

"The best thing about working with the center is the motivation they give me to move forward," said Johnson, who operates Spring Creek Farms and produces a line of 28 gourmet jams and jellies sold at gift shops and farmers' markets.

According to Rutgers, farming is a challenge in New Jersey, a small, populous state. Competition is enormous coming from huge factory farms in other places throughout the nation and world. Also, the state's infrastructure for processing food is poor to nonexistent, university officials say, since many food plants have moved to the South and Midwest where labor is cheaper.

In spite of the obstacles, New Jersey farmers are learning how to trump the competition.

"Value-added programs have been very successful from the USDA's perspective," Law said. "They offer small growers opportunities to become leaders of change in agriculture in New Jersey."

To improve on its farm-assistance program, the Food Innovation Center will build a new \$8.8 million business incubator on Florida Avenue here. Cooperhouse is hoping to raise the remaining capital in time for ground breaking this fall.

The facility will include a shared-use processing plant, where companies may develop and test their value-added food products. Farmers and entrepreneurs may lease the factory on an as-needed basis.

"Under one roof we will be able to help farmers and other entrepreneurs from business plan to product commercialization and market testing," Cooperhouse said.

The plant may be used to:

- Chop up and package lettuce and other greens for bagged salads.
- Process and flash-freeze potatoes for French fries.
- Make baked goods, jams and jellies from New Jersey fruit.
- Process cheese made with milk from New Jersey cows.

Developing new food products provides farmers with another key advantage - it lets them generate income after the growing season ends.

Once entrepreneurs turn a profit on their new products, they will be expected to "graduate" from the food center's leased factory and build new processing plants in their own communities.

The Food Innovation Center is a good thing for New Jersey on many levels, according to Cooperhouse.

Profitable farms producing new products spur local economies, create jobs, preserve open space and farmland, and make New Jersey a more livable place, he said.

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